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TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.  
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Director of Public Health and Health Officer

SUBJECT: HOUSING INSPECTION PROGRAM

On November 18, 2003, KNBC ran an investigative report by investigative reporter Joel Grover, that showed deplorable and unsanitary conditions in several rental apartment units. The story raised questions about the extent to which tenants can get information about the results of our housing inspections and about the effectiveness of our inspections in assuring that units are maintained in a habitable and safe condition. This is to provide you with a report of actions we are taking to improve this program.

## BACKGROUND

The Department inspects multi-family housing units across the County (except Long Beach, Pasadena and Vernon). Buildings with five (5) or more units are inspected for health code violations. The inventory includes 60,633 apartment buildings and 6,025 condominium buildings. Owners must obtain a Public Health Permit each year. The fee for apartment buildings ranges from \$156 to \$306 annually, plus an additional \$250 for a swimming pool. The fee for condominium buildings ranges from \$78 to \$153, plus \$250 for a pool.

By law, inspectors are limited to common areas of the buildings, except when tenants permit access to an individual unit. Since routine inspections must be conducted between 8:00 a.m. and dusk and are unannounced, it is often difficult to find enough people at home who will allow access to inspect a significant percentage of the units. This means that the inspection report reflects the results from inspections of common areas and an average of only ten percent (10%) of units.

Inspections are conducted for insects and vermin, water, plumbing, toilets, sinks, sanitation and structural issues which relate to health and safety. Referrals are made to the appropriate building and safety department for violations in this area. The inspector completes an inspection report, which is given to the owner. The inspection report includes a checklist of violation categories, with three levels of severity for each violation. Detailed comments are made about the problems detected in the common areas and in each unit for which access was achieved. The report also notes units for which the occupant stated there were no problems and entry into the unit was not granted. The form also contains a designation of the building into one of three risk groups.

The form does not include an overall score for the inspection. However, a score is computed when the information is entered into the data base. Although this score is similar to the restaurant score, in that 100 is a perfect score, the major difference is that the housing score is usually the result of only inspecting a small percentage of the total occupied units. In contrast, the restaurant score reflects the review of the entire facility.

When given the report, the owner is given a deadline for compliance (usually 30 days, unless an emergency situation exists). Noncompliance or repeated violations leads to an office hearing with a supervisor. Continued noncompliance leads to referral to the city attorney/district attorney for a hearing and possible court filing. In FY 2002-03, out of 61,300 inspections, 786 resulted in office hearings, which led to 416 city attorney hearings and 33 court filings. In the City of Los Angeles, Environmental Health staff participate in the Slum Housing Task Force, which has resulted in the prosecution of a number of landlords.

Multi-family housing buildings are put into several risk categories. The risk categories are assigned based on the results of the most recent inspection in the context of the history of inspection results. Higher-risk category buildings are inspected more often.

Inspection reports are public information and the Department receives regular requests for copies of reports. However, it is staff's perception that most of these requests are for use in landlord-tenant legal disputes and that many tenants do not know that they can obtain copies of these reports.

## **MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE**

Because the inspections of individual units require permission from the tenant and because that is where the majority of the health and safety issues are found, the success of the program is very much contingent on tenants reporting problems in their units. In FY 02/03, we received 8,015 complaints for multi-family apartments. Increasing access by tenants to make complaints and to receive information about the results of inspections is critical to this program.

We already have a complaint hot-line, 1-888-700-9995, which the public may access.

We have taken immediate action to make information about the inspections available on the Department's web-sites. Data from routine housing inspections since May 2003 were posted last night. We will add data going back several years as well as the results on complaint inspections over the next several weeks. At this point, the information available shows the type of violation and its level of severity. We will also post the inspection score and an explanation about the number of individual units we were able to access to determine that score.

In addition, working with County Counsel, we will propose an ordinance, requiring that landlords post signs or provide copies of information to tenants which informs them of the telephone number to call to make complaints and that information about previous inspections is available on the internet or through telephone request.

### **IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSPECTIONS**

The Department will review its current inspection program and determine whether enhanced staffing, with more in-depth inspections of problem properties, particularly including repeated attempts to inspect inside individual units, will yield better overall compliance and improve the health and safety of rental housing. We will analyze whether additional staff, paid from increased fees, would provide measurable improvements.

### **TRACKING INSPECTIONS AND COMPLIANCE**

Although Environmental Health does maintain a database of housing inspections and will be migrating to the multi-department property abatement system when fully implemented, the Department will establish interim systems to be sure that routine inspections of properties are not missed. We will also establish a coordinated database to track all complaint inspections and enhance tracking of compliance by owners in correcting violations.

### **ENFORCEMENT**

We will meet with city attorneys and the District Attorney to emphasize our desire to emphasize prosecution of recalcitrant landlords. We will also discuss ways to improve coordinated enforcement against recalcitrant landlords.

We will explore with County Counsel whether the Board may authorize imposition of administrative fines as a means of enhancing compliance

### **MEDIA RESPONSE**

We recognize that the previous interview with the reporter on this issue was confrontational and did not reflect the Department's expectations of staff interactions with the media. Following the original report that was aired on Tuesday, a follow-up interview was held today between Joel Grover and Jonathan Fielding. This provided an opportunity for the Department to provide information to the reporter in a manner more conducive to constructive discussion. It should be noted that Dr. Fielding has been designated as the Department spokesperson on this issue.

### **FOLLOW-UP**

We provide a further report at the Board meeting on November 25, 2003. If you have any questions or need additional information, please let us know.

TLG:JEF:jfs

c: Chief Administrative Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors